

Students' Podcast Transcript

Podcast: From the Shadows



Episode 1: The Role of Women as Catholic Recusants in Early Stuart England

Episode Description

This episode of 'From The Shadows' delves into the repressive (and sometimes gruesome) era of recusancy. Our host, Will, introduces and facilitates discussion from Isabel and Arun that explores the context of this period; introducing the iconic figure Margaret Clitherow, the female participation in the gunpowder plot and the significance of modern historiography. Later, discussion moves to Ellie who discusses domestic spaces and agency - challenging the idea that women were passive victims. Finally, Johnny finishes off by illustrating the debate surrounding Clitherow as a martyr and the significance of her punishment.

Show Notes and Key Resources

Bossy, John. *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850*. Routledge: 1975.

Corens, Liesbeth. *Confessional Mobility and English Catholics in Counter-Reformation Europe*.

Oxford: Oxford

University Press. 2018.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "Poem: Margaret Clitheroe" [Accessed 14 Dec. 2024].

<https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/margaret-clitheroe>.

Jackson, Clare. *Devil-Land*. London: Penguin UK, 2021.

Full Indicative Bibliography can be found [here](#).

Podcast Transcript

[Jingle]

Introduction

Will: Hello everyone and welcome to our podcast; we come to you today from the University of York. Hi, I'm Will, and I'll be your host. Today we are going to highlight the role of women as Catholic recusants in Early Stuart England. In this time period we have heard a lot about the great men; Charles I, James I and Guy Fawkes. However, the historiography of this period has revolutionised and historians such as Walsham, Corens and Jackson have released compelling research illustrating female martyrdom, the victimisation of Catholic recusant women and how class structures impacted recusancy. And that's what our podcast is all about today!

We are lucky today to be joined by historians who have read the wealth of new research, and they are going to discuss how women played such a vital role in the Catholic sphere during this period. We'll bring you insights into how history about Catholics is presented in Convents in York alongside the historical debates. Firstly, Arun and Isabel will contextualise the period and talk about the key women involved in recusancy! Then, Ellie and Johnny will bring us all up to date with the current historical debates surrounding this field!

Thank you for tuning in, we hope you enjoy!

[Swoosh]

Context and Key Events

Will: We'll start with the context, key figures and events. So, Isabel and Arun, what can you tell us about female Catholic recusants in this period?

Isabel: There were a few! One was local to us, and she was called Margaret Clitheroe. She is known as the "Pearl of York" and is very well known in this region. Currently you can visit her shrine on Shambles in York. Essentially, in the 16th century she harboured Catholic priests and maintained secret masses in her home. This was illegal at the time, and could result in fines and death. Eventually she was found out and she was executed in 1586. She

died by being pressed to death for refusing to plead to recusancy charges of harbouring priests.

Will: Arun, is it true that you have seen Margaret's shrine?

Arun: Not just her shrine, but her mummified hand, which I saw on a visit to the Bar Convent in York. I was accompanied by a nun who took me to the chapel where the hand was held, who told me stories of how the hand was cut off Margaret's body after her execution by a faithful, and has been kept in the convent since the late 17th Century. As uncomfortable as it may sound, the hand serves as a timepiece for female martyrdom in Catholicism, as this was one of the first known examples of a woman refusing to plead for recusancy charges and being executed as a result in order to protect her faith. This also sparked recent debate in the historical world, between those who see her as a proto-martyr, a first example that led a change, or whether her actions just reinforced traditional roles of domestic piety, and she was just another example of a Catholic sacrifice.

Will: So, we hear a lot about Guy Fawkes in relation to the Gunpowder Plot - what was the role of women in the plot?

Isabel: You're totally right, the narrative seems focused on Guy Fawkes and the male conspirators of the plot. However, the role of women was present, it's just been eclipsed over time. The wives and families of the plotters played key roles in protecting the Catholic communities during, and after the plot. Since once the plot was discovered it was a tumultuous time for Catholic recusants.

Robert Catesby was the leader of the Gunpowder Plotters, and he was a cousin of Anne Vaux. Anne used her family's wealth and standing to provide refuge for priests and to maintain the Catholic networks established before the plot.

Arun: However it should be mentioned that, contrasting to Clitherow's legacy as a dedicated Catholic, there have been some historians scrutinizing whether the involvement of women like Anne Vaux were driven by family connections and loyalty, rather than personal faith. For example an article written by Walsh titled "The Gunpowder Plotters' Wives" investigates the family ties that wove the plotters together, and how the involvement of mothers, sisters and wives made it easier for the progression of the plot itself, not the fact that they had religious ties.

Will: Very interesting! If Catholic recusants were so secretive, how have historians found out so much of this information? Especially about the women.

Isabel: Well, there is a series of books called the Recusant Rolls.

They were essentially records, arranged by county and they recorded the punishments of fines of those who refused to conform to the Church of England.

Arun: After 1581, recusancy became an indictable offence, so recusants could be fined or have their lands forfeited for not attending services or being caught harbouring or carrying out Catholic services. So, through using these records we can see which families, and importantly women, were caught not conforming to the Anglican faith.

Isabel: But, it is important to mention that the modern trend in historiography that studies the role of women - focuses on the active participation of women recusants, rather than passive victimhood. Instead of viewing these women as Catholics who were simply caught by the law, analysing their active participation leads to a more interesting historical perspective.

Arun: For example the historian Liesbeth Corens in her book 'Confessional Mobility' talks about the community in which women recusants formed around praying together. The medium of prayer books allowed for women, who were often restricted to the domestic sphere, to express their faith in a communal way.

Isabel: I loved a quote from Corens where she wrote that "since women were not allowed physically to join the men in the mission field, their contribution has long been overlooked."¹ I think this sums up well, the lack of discussion around women in the gunpowder plot.

Will: Thank you so much for that wonderful analysis Isabel and Arun! Now on to the historiographical debate with Ellie and Johnny.

[Swoosh]

Historiographical Debates

Agency vs Victimhood

Will: We've rejigged the studio, and I'm now joined by two new people sat opposite me! So, Ellie, to what extent were women active in recusancy?

Ellie: Whilst traditionally women have perhaps been seen as passive, with men in the foreground of religious resistance and recusancy, recent historiography and case studies actually suggest otherwise!

With this debate surrounding agency it's really important to consider what that meant at the time, and making sure not to impose our own connotations of it. Seguin points out the risk of modern ideas of agency which leads to labelling women as victims because much of the work they did in preserving catholicism was in domestic space.

Will: How does the domestic space link to the agency of these women?

¹ Corens 142

Ellie: The role of women as educators or harbouring priests, like Margret Clitherow, was integral to the catholic cause. The role of women has perhaps been overlooked because they weren't overtly seen in the mission field.

But actually, a popular argument by Bossy suggests that because of the dangers faced by men, because of the risk to their livelihoods through targeted penal laws and fines, the Catholic community at the time was almost matriarchal!

As Isabel suggested, the climate and context of the time was rather repressive, which adds more value to women's role due to the now more politically charged nature of domestic spaces.

Will: So you're saying the role of women in domestic spaces was, perhaps, undervalued?

Women's role in domestic spaces has perhaps been undervalued when talking about agency because with modern standards of agency we might see this as confining but as pointed out by Corens it was seen by these women themselves as a place of empowerment!

The influence of women cannot be underestimated, for example Bastow posits that private chapel ceremonies often held in gentry households were led by women, the most famous in Yorkshire was one led by the Vavasours, she also suggests that Anne Vavasour's influence in Elizabeth's chamber meant that it was *conveniently* overlooked. This illustrates the political and social networks associated with women, domestic spaces and the recusant community.

Will: You mentioned women as educators, how did they contribute to the cause this way?

Ellie: So, Corens' recent scholarship really emphasises the perceived value of education for the catholic cause by reformers, the danger of producing children who were heretical. Bastow points out how women who would retain Catholic practices by introducing them to their offspring or sending them to continental houses to be educated, even when their husbands were conformists!

Will: Thank you Ellie for that wonderful overview. Johnny will now provide us with a lens into the role of women and Catholic Martyrdom.

Piety and Martyrdom

Will: Hello Johnny. The case study we'll be discussing is that of Margaret Clitherow. Who, if I'm correct, is often remembered as the "Pearl of York" for her unwavering devotion. But was her martyrdom simply a reflection of her piety? Or is there more to it than that?

Johnny: Nice to see you will, and well, Margaret's faith was undeniably central to her martyrdom. She was a Catholic recusant during a time when practicing Catholicism was like

asking to be sent to the gallows—or, in her case, under a giant rock. She refused to renounce her beliefs, even when it meant harboring priests and risking her life.

As Patrick Collinson highlights, her refusal to plead was a deeply spiritual act. She believed she was protecting her family and community by avoiding a trial, which could implicate others. In doing so, she became a Catholic Church icon, embodying the Church's resistance to Elizabethan religious reforms.

So, yes, her faith was the driving force, but it's not the whole picture.

Will: And then there's the method of execution itself—pressing. What was the purpose of this brutal death?

Johnny: Well as Colin Haydon points out, the brutality of her death was supposed to silence her. But instead, it had the opposite effect. Her execution elevated her to martyr status, turning her into a symbol of religious defiance that outlasted the people who tried to crush her—literally.

Challenging Gender Norms

Will: Right, so Margaret's faith made her a martyr. But let's talk about the part that might make Elizabethan officials a little nervous. Does her story challenge the idea that female martyrs were all submissive and passive?

Johnny: Oh, absolutely. Margaret was about as far from “passive” as you can get. Her actions – like hiding priests and running a secret Catholic hub – were acts of open defiance. She wasn't just following her faith; she was resisting the state in a way that women simply weren't “supposed” to. Lisa McClain calls her a “spiritual warrior,” which is a nice way of saying she broke all the rules about how women were expected to behave.

Will: And then there's her refusal to plead in court. I mean, why refuse to defend yourself when you know punishment is as intense as it was?

Johnny: Natalia Khomenko argues that her silence was a strategic move. By refusing to plead, she denied the state the chance to prosecute her publicly and avoided implicating her family. It was a power play that flipped the script on expectations of female submission. And really, how often do you see women in the 16th Century outsmart the court?

Will: So, not only was she a woman of faith, but she was also a woman of resistance – kind of like a saintly rebel with a cause?

Johnny: Exactly. Her actions weren't just about piety; they were about agency. They turned what was supposed to be a submissive role – martyrdom – into a statement of defiance. And in doing so, she challenged both religious and gendered power structures.

Will: Right, Margaret Clitherow's story has it all: faith, defiance, and, unfortunately, a rock the size of a small cow. But more importantly, she shows us that martyrdom wasn't just about submission – it was a stage for resistance. She proved that even in death, women could be agents of change.

Johnny: Couldn't have said it better myself, Will. Her legacy reminds us that faith and defiance often go hand in hand, even when the odds—and the rocks—are stacked against you

[Swoosh Sound Effect]

Ending

Will: Well thank you so much to Arun, Isabel, Ellie and Johnny for that wonderful and enlightening look at the debates and historical findings about Women and Catholic Recusancy in Early Stuart England. Thank you so much for tuning in and have a wonderful day!

[Jingle]